

Module 8 – How to Teach Speaking and Writing

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I. Why productive skills are important

Speaking and writing skills are called **productive skills**. They are crucial as they give students the opportunity to practise real-life activities in the classroom. You can also use them as a 'barometer' to check how much your students have learned.

Teaching speaking is vital unless someone is learning English purely for academic reasons and does not intend to communicate in English, which is quite rare. Seeing their speaking skills develop gives learners a real sense of progress and boosts their confidence.

Teaching writing is important because written communication is a basic life skill. Students may need to take notes, fill in forms, write letters, reports and stories. Many need to fill in detailed questionnaires relating to health, education and employment. The amount of time you spend on teaching writing will naturally depend on your students' needs.

Another reason students need to write is for assimilation. Writing is an effective way of reinforcing what students have already been studying, and they benefit greatly from seeing new or unfamiliar language in written form. Writing is a good way to practise grammar structures, it helps students to recycling and look up new vocabulary and to learn English punctuation rules. It encourages learner autonomy when students are asked to keep journals or turn in regular writing assignments that they carry out at home.

II. Teaching writing

1. Aspects of effective writing

Before looking at how to teach writing skills, consider the many aspects of effective writing. Correctness and accuracy are needed in the following areas.

Grammar

Grammar is important for both speaking and writing. However, when we speak we are more likely to use simple grammar and it's easier to get away with incorrect sentences. In writing every grammar error stands out, which is why it is especially important to know the rules.

Vocabulary

Being able to choose the most accurate words to express your thoughts in writing is the key to being understood.

Spelling

There are few spelling rules in English, and the connection between how a word is spelled and how it is pronounced is less clear-cut than in many other languages. Our students need to learn the spelling of each word.

Punctuation

This helps us understand written text the way intonation helps us understand another person's speech.

Layout

You will want to teach layout conventions for letter writing. Students must be made aware of the conventions of certain forms of writing, for example, informal letters, formal letters, poems, scientific reports, diaries, faxes, notes, and postcards.

Linking

Consider linking ideas and information across sentences and paragraphs to develop a topic or argument.

Style

Teach appropriate styles. For example, our written English on a postcard to a friend is completely different from a letter to a government office asking for information.

2. The stages of a successful writing lesson

Try to include written tasks in all your lessons, whether you are teaching grammar, vocabulary or communication skills. It's a good idea to practise all the four skills in a lesson. Once in a while, give more focus to the written skills –i.e. your whole lesson can become a preparation for a written activity. The actual writing part can be so time-consuming that sometimes you may want to leave it for homework. Written tasks performed in class can be made more interactive by getting students to write in pairs. Get one person to write with a pen and the other to help their partner correct mistakes and provide him or her with ideas.

Take a look at these ten steps to a successful writing lesson. You may want to adapt them to suit you.

1. Introduce the topic and ask students to discuss it in small groups, followed by feedback and discussion with the whole class.
2. Assign the writing task.
3. Ask students to consider who will be the target reader and to focus on the purpose of the task.
4. Use language models to illustrate the appropriate form (e.g. other written texts, examples on board).
5. Brainstorm ideas in groups, after which the teacher or a student writes them up on the board. Students select which ones to use.
6. Elicit how to put the ideas into a logical sequence and edit.
7. Construct a skeleton text in small groups.
8. Prepare a rough draft either individually, in groups or with the whole class.
9. Ask students to tell you if they want you to repeat anything. (This is more effective than saying “Does anyone not understand?”).
10. The final written task may be given for homework.

3. Types of writing activities

Now take a look at the following writing activities for the classroom.

Letters

Get your students to make complaints, thank, ask for and give information or advice, prepare job applications.

Creative writing

You can use pictures or begin a story and ask students to finish it. Or you can use a personal situation where the student was happy, sad, surprised, shocked, etc

Diary

Ask your students to keep a diary.

Discursive essays

Students need to present an argument, state points 'for' and 'against' in a logical way, and write a conclusive paragraph. (This is often required by Exam Boards.)

Instructions

It might be a recipe, directions, changing a wheel, cooking a meal, making a cup of tea, repairing something or applying for a visa.

Dictation

A dictation can have a calming effect on young learners. It is also useful for teachers who have limited resources and need to dictate a text for a reading skills lesson. Alternatively, you could ask your students to dictate to each other and to focus also on pronunciation and listening skills. Dictations are good for spelling as there is no direct link in English between the way words are written and the way they sound.

Here are some extra ideas for different levels of learner:

Beginners/elementary

1. Descriptions (home, family members and friends, your job, a place etc.);
2. Short biography of self, family member or famous person;
3. Emails to a pen friend.

Intermediate (ideas from the previous list can be used as well)

1. Problem pages;
2. Horoscopes;
3. Magazine interviews;
4. Advertisements;
5. Quizzes and puzzles;
6. Film and book reviews.

Advanced (ideas from the previous lists can be used as well)

1. Letters to the editor;
2. Essays/Articles arguing and defending a point of view;
3. Research papers.

4. Three fun writing ideas for the classroom

Below are three ideas for fun writing activities:

Level	All
Time	2 hours
Materials	None
Skills	Writing
Procedure	<p>Draw simple pictures on the board to elicit the idea of fairy stories. Brainstorm characters and situations found in traditional stories. Brainstorm things that are never found in traditional stories. Write on two piles of paper. In pairs or small groups students come forward, pick out a form from each pile, discuss and write a few lines of the story. When the ideas dry up they come and select two more.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>The same game but done with soap operas. Use categories such as characters, places, situations, and feelings.</p>

Level	Pre-intermediate
Time	40 minutes
Materials	Pens, paper, blu tac and squares of paper
Skills	Reading and writing
Procedure	<p>Give out pieces of paper and explain to your students that they are going to draw two pictures of presents they have had, or would love to get. Collect and hand out again to different students. Tell them they are going to write a thank you letter to their granny and describe the presents without saying what they are. Stick letters on the board. Your students must walk round and read and guess the presents.</p>

Level	All
Time	1-2 hours
Materials	Pens, paper
Skills	Writing
Procedure	<p>Your students draw doodles, then write a story based on the picture, on the board or on paper. One word at a time.</p> <p>Follow up: change the adjectives, verbs, synonyms etc.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Use music as a stimulus. Same technique can be used to build up situational dialogues, eg ordering food in a restaurant.</p>

III. Teaching speaking

1. The importance of student talking time (STT)

Establishing the right balance between teacher talking time (TTT) and student talking time (STT) is essential in any language classroom.

Students certainly gain a great deal from Teacher Talking Time (TTT). They can improve their pronunciation as they grow accustomed to new sounds, intonation and stress patterns. It is also essential to help develop their listening skills. Nonetheless, it's crucial for students to do more talking than the teacher. Why is this?

One reason is because being able to use English to communicate right from the start is highly engaging and motivating to students. Students enjoy speaking and it is usually the top priority for them.

Speaking activities help the rapport, group dynamics and atmosphere in class. Furthermore, they require students to draw upon what they already know in order to express their ideas. In this way they are always reviewing previous knowledge and putting it into practise with the new information still being assimilated. Finally, speaking is useful for the teacher as it's a good indication of the students' strengths and weaknesses.

Note:

Teaching speaking is **not**: simply repeating what the teacher has said.

Teaching speaking **is**: performing an oral task with a real motivation behind it.

Adding a purpose to a spoken activity makes it much more rewarding, engaging and motivating for students. These purposeful activities can take many different forms, from competitions to role-plays.

2. How to maximise STT

Take a look at the following ways of maximising student-talking time:

During the planning stage:

- Think about the balance of teacher input and student output. Remember that in a PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production) lesson, STT is maximised and that students should be speaking at all stages and not just for the last few minutes.
- Remember to choose materials that are interesting and engaging.
- Think about your instructions before giving them so they are clear and you don't waste time using unnecessary meta-language . If in doubt, script what you are going to say.

- Incorporate lots of pair and group work in your lessons; this will help reduce teacher talking time. Arrange seats and tables in a position that matches the activity you are planning to do.

During class:

- Concentrate on eliciting rather than on telling students, e.g. when drawing a picture on the board ask, "Who's this?" rather than spoon-feeding them.
- Ask open-ended questions (Who, What, Why, How, etc) rather than closed questions which can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no'.
- Give students plenty of thinking time to process what they are going to say, don't insist on them responding immediately.
- Be a good listener; show interest in what the students are saying and respond naturally.

At the end of the class:

- Correcting errors - make it a class activity by putting errors that you have noted down during the class on the board. Ask the students to discuss in pairs what is wrong with the sentences and how to correct them.
- Getting feedback - do a session asking students to sum up what they have learnt during the lesson; this rounds it off nicely and gives them a sense of progress.

3. Types of speaking activities

Here are some popular types of speaking activities:

- Describe and draw/describe and arrange
- Dialogues
- Information gaps - where two students have different information and have to work together to solve a problem, e.g. Spot the difference: students have similar pictures with a number of differences. They ask and answer questions to find out what the differences are.
- Surveys and questionnaires - students prepare questions on topics such as cinema, sleep, free time activities, likes and dislikes and conduct a survey by interviewing each other and compiling information.
- Discussions and debates - for intermediate and advanced learners.
- Role-plays - students are encouraged to imagine that they are in different situations and have to take on a role, e.g. they may be an angry customer in a restaurant complaining to a waiter.

4. Discussions and debates

When considering discussions or debates, make sure you find the right topic. Feel free to choose contentious subjects but be careful with topics that are taboo in your students' culture as well as those some of your students may feel particularly sensitive about.

Discussions

For example, students could discuss if hunting should be banned or if money can make you happy or what the world will be like in the year 2100. Elicit keywords, collocations and structures which can be used when discussing this topic and write them on the board.

Make sure your students know how to express their opinion, e.g. I believe; I suppose; To my mind; If you ask me; I am convinced that; The way I see it; etc. These expressions need to be pre-taught to students of lower levels. With students of higher levels, who are experienced in discussions and debates, let them go ahead and tell the classmates what they think on the subject. Encourage other students to agree or disagree with the speakers and give their reasons. If everybody seems to agree with a speaker's point of view, act as an opposition, i.e. give reasons why the speaker may not be quite right and ask the class what they think.

Students may be reluctant to give their opinion in front of the whole class, particularly if they need time to think about their ideas. This is usually true with students of lower levels or those with little experience of open discussion (they may be more used to grammar/writing-oriented tasks). If so, give students time to discuss the topic in a wheel shape arrangement first. It will give them confidence to speak to the class later.

Debates

For a debate, let students work in groups preparing arguments in favour of and against certain propositions, so that, when the debate starts, the panel-speakers produce well-rehearsed arguments, whereas others in the audience contribute their own (less scripted) thoughts on the subject. Usually there are two opposing points of view in a debate, although sometimes there is a third point of view which is a compromise between the two.

After the group work, split the class into two or three groups and let each group make their proposition and counter-proposition respectively, followed by a session where each group asks and answers the other group's questions.

5. Role-plays

Role plays demand a certain amount of organisation. Before the role-play remember to do the following:

- Set a clear scenario which is conducive to interaction, i.e. students can identify with the characters and will probably know what to say as one of the characters
- Define the roles clearly; you may want to give students sticky labels with brief descriptions of their characters
- Give students time to think about what they're going to say.

Here are some possible scenarios for role-plays:

- Job centre and job seekers - students inquire about certain jobs
- Landlord / landlady and tenants - Act out a problem between tenant/landlord/landlady
- Shopkeepers and buyers
- Pet shop and customers - Pet shop owner convincing people to buy pets
- Ground staff and passengers - Not enough seats, so passengers have to convince ground staff.

6. Three fun speaking ideas for the classroom

Balloon debate

A popular example of a debate is a balloon debate. Draw a picture of a hot-air balloon. Put your students into groups of three and four. Tell them that they are travelling to a desert island together, when the balloon starts to lose altitude.

To avoid crashing, tell your students that two of them have to be thrown out. They can choose to be famous people or certain professions and then justify why they should stay in the balloon.

Such a scenario encourages students to be passionate and eloquent speakers as they defend their 'right to live' by describing the importance of their profession.

Ranking

You could also instigate a ranking exercise. Start by pre-teaching the language of opinions. You can brainstorm inventions, crimes, the qualities of a friend, teacher or parent. Get your students to rank them.

Do this individually, then in pairs, and finally as a class or large group. Make sure your students give reasons for their choices. Vote for a final decision.

Advice

Level	Pre-intermediate and above
Time	20-30 minutes depending on level
Materials	Board and labels
Skills	Asking questions, listening, predicting

Procedure	<p>Your students draw doodles, then write a story based on the picture, on the board or on paper. One word at a time.</p> <p>Follow up: change the adjectives, verbs, synonyms etc.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Use music as a stimulus. Same technique can be used to build up situational dialogues, eg ordering food in a restaurant.</p>
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